

## Between 'Information' and 'Inspiration'

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# **Between “Information” and “Inspiration”: The Office of War Information, Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* series and US World War II Propaganda**

**Gregory Frame**

While there is little debate that the United States *required* propaganda films as part of its war effort in order to combat the masterful and dangerous concoctions of the Axis powers and to inspire its people for a war of unprecedented ferocity against an unrelenting and vicious enemy, how these films should be constituted, and by whom, was a matter of significant debate and disagreement. This chapter will address the background to the propaganda produced by the United States during World War II, but will interrogate and analyse perhaps its most famous and sophisticated expression: the *Why We Fight* series. Executive produced by prominent Hollywood director Frank Capra, the series skilfully interwove newsreel footage, enemy propaganda, animated maps and battlefield reportage, into a coherent, dynamic and highly persuasive vision of the world before, during and after World War II. Although *Why We Fight* demonises the enemy, particularly the Japanese, as malevolent, frightening peoples driven by a collective insanity that was created by their maniacal leaders, it is as much concerned with emphasising the common cause of the Allies.

The picture of the United States’ propaganda operations during World War II is a complex one. On the one hand, there was the government’s production of films for consumption by civilians at home and abroad, as well as ‘orientation’ films for troops heading into battle. On the other, there was the government’s relationship with Hollywood and the concerted attempt to ensure that the film industry’s output supported the war effort. Around the fringes of these operations existed a palpable hesitation about the production and utilisation of propaganda

films, and this anxiety coalesced around two factors. Firstly, the idea of propaganda – setting out deliberately to manipulate people through misleading, sometimes inaccurate information – was considered anathema to a nation proud of its democratic ideals and traditions (Koppes and Black 1990: 48). The United States was the only major power without an official propaganda agency prior to World War II. Secondly, it was widely regarded that films produced during World War I, particularly the popular shorts that demonised the Germans as ‘oversized marauding ape[s] that indiscriminately kidnapped and slaughtered Belgian women and children’ had overstepped the mark (Geiger 2011: 125). These excesses prompted a call for a more streamlined and careful approach to the form during World War II, which led to the creation of the Office of War Information (OWI) by presidential decree in June 1942.

OWI was designed, as Betsy McLane suggests, “to coordinate all government information released to the media and to develop its own means of informing the public” (McLane 2012: 147). A wide variety of propaganda films were produced, aimed at audiences domestic and international, civilian and military. However, chaos continued to be caused by a number of government information divisions competing over similar territory which, taken together, failed to create a coherent and unified war vision. While it was accepted that “controls over the politic and morality of American movies were ... crucial to the project of establishing national unity,” the relationship proceeded in a rather disorganised, *ad hoc* fashion (Geiger 2011: 127). As Koppes and Black note, “propaganda policy evolved from a typically Rooseveltian melange of caution, indirection, duplication, half-measures and ambiguity” (Koppes and Black 1990: 50). OWI was meant to take charge of propaganda, but the Office of the Co-Ordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA), devoted to operations in Latin America, retained its independence. OWI itself was separated into branches dealing with foreign and domestic affairs, with the latter branch working closely with Hollywood to

produce pictures that would bolster the war effort. Hollywood, otherwise supportive, nonetheless resisted anything that would impact its business interests. As Thomas Doherty notes of the Washington/Hollywood relationship during the war, “the liaison [...] was a distinctly American and democratic arrangement, a mesh of public policy and business enterprise” (Doherty 1991: 63). Aside from any conflict with Hollywood studios, OWI also faced hostile opposition from Congress which, consistent in its resistance to Roosevelt’s New Deal, attempted to block the unit’s funding, citing concerns regarding infringement of free speech. Ultimately, OWI’s Domestic Branch “never succeeded in getting a production programme underway,” a failure driven by a combination of a recalcitrant Congress and the American people’s widespread suspicion of information directed at them by the government (McLane 2012: 48).

The confusion and apparent disorganisation of the United States’ propaganda strategy is indicative of a nation experiencing a profound struggle as to how it would deliver films that would galvanise its citizenry and inspire its troops without compromising its democratic ideals. The approach taken, to produce films that would celebrate Americanism rather than vilify its enemies, combated this anxiety: Robert Riskin’s work for the OWI’s Overseas Bureau, the ambitious *Projections of America* films (of which 26 were produced) aimed to challenge preconceptions of the United States in foreign territories (Scott 2008: 347). Both Riskin and his chief of production Phillip Dunne preferred the subtly persuasive brand of propaganda to the more common aggressive approach: their films were intended to generate sympathy for the ‘American way’, promoting free speech, free enterprise and equal opportunities. Films such as *Valley of the Tennessee* (Hamid, 1944) and *The Town* (von Sternberg, 1945) were affirmations of Americanism for foreign audiences, the former a paean to the ways in which “American ingenuity and the collective pioneer spirit have translated

into social progress and personal empowerment,” the latter a reconstruction of Rockwellesque fantasy, an image of Middle America as “clean-cut, industrious, family-oriented, churchgoing” (Geiger 2011: 133). In the worlds created by Riskin’s films, the post-war landscape would be as imagined by Roosevelt’s famous “Four Freedoms” speech of 1941: “led by the US and characterized by freedoms of speech, of religion, and of freedom from want and fear” (135).

Similarly inspiring films were sought for American troops, ones that offered more than the usual training information. George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the US Army, believed that soldiers should not just be shown *how* to fight, but told *why* this particular fight is as necessary: for him, “military education was never just a matter of force-fed information and rote recitation but of nurtured incentive and felt commitment” (Doherty 1993: 70). As McLane suggests, it was assumed that servicemen would be “more committed and able fighters if they knew about the events leading up to, and the reasons for, US participation in the war” (2012: 139). The OWI was careful to avoid the terms ‘indoctrination’ and ‘propaganda’ (considered ‘un-American’), and preferred instead ‘orientation’ (ibid.) Given this strategy, it is perhaps unsurprising that Frank Capra was employed to produce the series. The films Capra directed in the preceding decade, including: *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *Meet John Doe* (1941), are often remembered as shining celebrations of the United States’ democracy and economy. In truth, they are more complicated. In all three films, the Capra hero – the ordinary, honest, straightforward individual – is brought in to rescue this system from corruption and greed. In their own individual ways, Capra’s films can be viewed as performing acts of rescue for America’s democratic and economic systems in the darkest hours of the Great Depression. *Meet John Doe*, in particular, released six months prior to America’s entry in to World War II, was a

downbeat vision of the ways in which the ‘common man’ could be overwhelmed by a society manipulated by a deceitful press kowtowing to corporate interests. *Why We Fight* would offer a similar impression of what life would be like if the United States did not stand up for its values, while simultaneously celebrating the courage and heroism of its allies and pointing the way to a brighter, more prosperous and peaceful future.

*Why We Fight* was an ambitious project that, as Richard Dyer MacCann suggested, sought first to destroy faith in the notion that the United States could remain isolated and unaffected by the wars in Europe and the Far East; second, to create a clear dichotomy between the strong and righteous Allies and the stupid and malevolent Axis; and third, to ensure that the courage and success of America’s allies before December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941 was recognised (1973: 157). What Capra recognised from the beginning, however, was that this intention could not be fully realised or achieved without recourse to techniques used in drama in order to excite the senses, inspire and, in many cases, horrify and disgust. The dazzling array of methods employed, combining existing footage (newsreels, Allied and captured enemy records of battle, segments from fictional films, Nazi propaganda films) with animation, voiceover narration, music and dynamic editing, were put in service of this goal. As Doherty notes of the series’ style and composition, “never before had the entire panoply of cinematic devices been put to such concerted and seamless instructional use” (1993: 74).

The series consisted of seven parts: *Prelude to War* (1942), *The Nazis Strike* (1943) and *Divide and Conquer* (1943) covered the years from the end of World War I until American entry into World War II, and constructed the clear dividing lines between the Allies and the Axis. *The Battle of Britain* (1943), *The Battle of Russia* (1943) and *The Battle of China* (1943) saw the series turn its attention to the specific campaigns fought by America’s allies,

and looked to draw these nations together in common cause, emphasising their beliefs in freedom from tyranny (a debatable characterisation of the Soviet Union at the time) and their bravery and determination to achieve this goal. The final part, *War Comes to America* (1945) examined changing attitudes in the United States as a result of the war. In the rest of this chapter I will address each film in turn but retain the clear demarcation between the films that focus on the ‘pre-war’ phase of action and those that concentrate on the campaigns (the former has attracted far more critical attention than the latter). I will explore the ways in which the thematic drive of the series – to celebrate the values of freedom and democracy as simultaneously American and universal – is demonstrated and reinforced consistently through its use of film language. In so doing, this chapter will show how *Why We Fight*’s function was not simply to demonise the enemies of these values, but to act as a clarion call to defeat them and build a better world underpinned by a benign vision of Americanism.

### ***Prelude to War* (1942) / *The Nazis Strike* (1943) / *Divide and Conquer* (1943)**

*Prelude to War* establishes the series’ themes, style and overall message swiftly and uncompromisingly. Quoting Vice President Henry Wallace, it constructs a clear dichotomy between ‘the free world’, a gleaming white globe of hope and optimism, and ‘the slave world’, a black void dominated by authoritarian regimes, violent demagogues and people suffering from collective insanity and mass delusion. Geiger suggests that the film “leaves little room for contemplation,” “disallows questioning of images” and “presents audiences with a simple, divided world view” (2011: 136). This is inarguable, although one might question why this is necessarily problematic given the intended audience of the film and its goals: as Joseph McBride suggests, the “‘us or them’ dialectic gave the films the emotional power Capra sought, simplifying the enormously complex historical and political issues

underlying the war into a single, quickly grasped, black-and-white concept”(1992: 468).

Capra believed that normal soldiers had little to no understanding of geopolitics and therefore, in order to achieve the stated aim of inspiring the troops through a clear celebration of Americanism and denigration of its enemies, this apparently simplistic approach was the only way (469).

*Prelude to War* is very keen to emphasise the similarities and common bonds between the Allies despite their various differences in language, culture and systems of government and economy, and its internationalist approach is emphasised in the first few minutes of the film, which seek to historicise and explain America’s reasons for intervention not merely as a response to the attack on Pearl Harbor but as a result of the cumulative effect of Axis violence towards Britain, France, China, Czechoslovakia, Norway and Greece (to name but a few), achieved through a rapid montage of battlefield footage. It is underpinned by the greatness of the American system of government which, according to the film, represents the greatest that mankind has achieved, with particular significance afforded to the Declaration of Independence and the figures of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. This strategy is entirely in keeping with the series’ joint goals of emphasising the need for international cooperation and celebrating American democratic traditions (467).

Every opportunity is taken to contrast this image of tolerance, freedom and democracy with the frightening authoritarianism, imperialism and violence of the Axis powers. However, this does not automatically lead to a demonisation of the people of these nations. While there remains rhetoric that plays clearly on national stereotypes (‘Germans had in an inborn love of regimentation and harsh discipline’), great emphasis is placed on the *cessation of thought* in these countries, the film arguing that the peoples of Germany, Italy and Japan were being



manipulated by dangerous, devious men pursuing nefarious ends. Capra's films, particularly *American Madness* (1932) and *Meet John Doe* (1941), are often wary of the tendency of the masses to behave irrationally, abandoning their principles when threatened by insecurity and *Prelude to War* is no different. Newsreel images show huge crowds of Italians and Germans mindlessly saluting their Mussolini ('an ambitious rabble rouser') and Hitler ('a forceful demagogue [who] took advantage of postwar chaos'), respectively. Particularly chilling is the lengthy montage of footage of children training, marching and saluting in unison in all three Axis countries. As James Agee notes of this sequence, it is a "virtuoso job of selection and cutting, and the grimmest image of fascism I have seen on a screen" (1975: 156). The intended meaning here is to present the German, Italian and Japanese people as victims of brainwashing by their leaders, striding mindlessly towards oblivion.

*Prelude to War* establishes animation, which is employed consistently throughout the series, as a fundamental stylistic choice to illustrate the manipulation and imperial ambition of the Axis powers. Animated telegraph poles, representing the Axis' ability to manipulate their populations through propaganda, transmit 'lies, lies, lies.' Piles of animated coins, representing the Nazi military budget, dominate the screen. In keeping with the dichotomy established by the 'free' and 'slave' world construction at the film's beginning, maps illustrate the conquering of nations by subsuming them beneath a malevolent, almost tumorous black ink. The plan for global domination is outlined halfway through *Prelude to War*, with the final phase being the capture of the United States by Japan and Germany. If one of the series' stated aims was to 'destroy faith in isolation', the depiction of such an alarming present and frightening future is likely to have played a significant part in it, showing the entire globe under the dominion of the *swastika* and the rising sun. In the final part of the film, which chronicles Japan's attempt to conquer China, the campaign is

introduced by a dagger being driven into the heart of Manchuria, preceded by a steadily rising drumbeat and accompanied by a clap of thunder. It is a dramatic device clearly designed to shake loose any lingering shards of complacency.

*The Nazis Strike* elaborates on the relentlessness and brutality of the Nazis introduced in *Prelude to War*. Much of the film concentrates on Nazi treachery up to the formal beginning of World War II: the annexation of Austria, the stealthy capture of Czechoslovakia and the conquest of Poland. Richard Barsam argues it is “a highly charged, emotionally told history of the ‘maniacal will,’ the ‘madness,’ and the ‘insane passion for conquest’ of the Nazi leaders” (1975: 152). The film is preoccupied with establishing the Nazis as a formidable, malevolent and terrifying force. In keeping with this reading, it begins with footage from Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935), which Capra described as ‘terrifying’ in his autobiography; “the ominous prelude of Hitler’s holocaust of hate”, but “as a psychological weapon aimed at destroying the will to resist, it was just as lethal” (Capra 1971: 328). The expressed intention behind the repurposing of this footage for American propaganda was to divest it of its mythological underpinning: traumatic images of the victims of Nazi violence are superimposed over the militaristic precision of the Nuremberg rally. The goose-stepping soldiers, mindlessly obeying their leader, are made to look ridiculous, undermined by music that would not sound out of place in a Looney Tunes cartoon. As Capra himself stated, “We took their own footage and tried to make it backfire on them” (quoted in Bailey 2004: 127).

However, examining it closely it is clear that the film intended to construct the Nazis as an awesome force not to be underestimated: as Doherty notes, “the enemy soldier should be looked upon as a vicious gangster – skilful, dedicated, and deadly as a cobra” (1993: 75). The use of *Triumph of the Will* is intended to show the Nazis as united, disciplined and, judging

by the ominous music that accompanies the film's title at the beginning, a formidable foe. This intention is reinforced by the German-accented voiceover narration early on in the film that looks at the rearming process and the insane, terrifying ideology that lay behind it: 'forget hours, forget working conditions, forget how to think... let the democracies talk about freedom. No freedom here. No labour unions. No overtime. The führer tells you where to work, when to work, how long to work, how much your work is worth. [...] We have a sacred mission: today we rule Germany, tomorrow the world.' This foreboding monologue is followed by two rapid tracking shots of saluting Germans superimposed over one another. Accompanied by the repeated chant of 'Sieg heil!', the image is visually and aurally overwhelming.

The tendency to present the Nazi war machine as an all-encompassing, unstoppable force risks painting a rather hopeless picture. The conclusion is an emotional one, designed to disturb and terrify: underscored by the second movement of Beethoven's 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony, reported to be a favourite of Hitler's, the consequences of Nazi violence are laid bare. The destruction of Poland is made manifest through the relentless rhythm of the music, its minor key lending it a mournful quality, and accompanying images of Polish corpses lining the streets, mothers weeping over dead children. The volume and timbre of the music builds to a crescendo, which further reinforces the overwhelming nature of Nazi devastation. Cannily, the film does not end here but rather with a note of hope: the British declaration of war, which, explored at the very end of the film, is designed to inspire, cited as evidence that 'the democracies had convictions on which they were willing to stake their lives.' The film then repeats some of the images of displaced, desperate, weeping Polish civilians used only moments prior, this time underscored both by Beethoven and Winston Churchill's inspirational words: 'Lift up your hearts, all will come right, and out of the depths of sorrow

and of sacrifice will be born again the glory of mankind', before a rousing chorus of 'Onward Christian Soldiers' and the Liberty Bell draws the film to its ultimate conclusion. Barsam suggests that this "mood of moral righteousness" detracts from the film's effectiveness, but it is difficult to see how: the repetition of the footage of civilians at the film's end allows it to perform the task of the series overall; to inform *and* inspire (1975: 152). The closing moments of *The Nazis Strike* is intended to fulfil the latter half of the bargain in explicit terms.

*Divide and Conquer* is the first of the films to look in great detail at military strategy (although the latter part of *The Nazis Strike* did explore this in relation to Poland), and deals primarily with the Nazi conquest of Western Europe and Scandinavia, building towards The Battle of Britain. McLane suggests the film is akin to a classical tragedy, and the comparison is certainly a compelling one: the film begins with the conquering of Poland, moving through German strategy and Hitler's treachery, before chronicling the speed and ruthless efficiency with which the German army overwhelmed Denmark and Norway, detailing French vulnerability to invasion, showing the swift defeats of Holland and Belgium before concluding, in heartbreaking fashion, with the fall of France (2012: 142). The use of combat footage and animation work again in conjunction to present images of Nazi power, with particular care taken to ensure the images, assembled from a variety of sources, appear as though they had originated with this production: as McLane notes, it is "almost as if all of this footage had been shot for these films under Capra's or Litvak's direction" (ibid.). The effect of this assembly is a sense of intensity: the rapidly edited footage of German artillery battering the French lines creates an unremitting din, Nazi strength further reinforced by the figuration of their forces as an enormous phallic arrow piercing the French lines with ease, which fragment and scatter in the face of this potent, ruthless barrage.

Hitler is explicitly compared with John Dillinger, his treachery and backhandedness reinforced at every turn by quotations of his peaceful intentions towards these nations before proceeding to chronicle the brutal bombardment and cruelty towards civilians, particularly children (indeed, the series' tendency to emphasise the suffering of children is amongst its most blunt persuasive techniques). The persuasive strategies here are similar to the previous two films, although it is slightly more preoccupied with the parade of Nazi ghouls and presenting Hitler at his most theatrical. Importantly, the voiceover narration does not contextualise or translate these speeches, preferring instead to allow the maniacal performances to speak for themselves, including a montage of unquestioning followers saluting their leaders. This renders the footage of Hitler striding into France to secure its surrender before taking a tour of Paris all the more upsetting, underscored first by stunned silence, and then by a mournful trumpet and drumbeat as disconsolate French citizens weep at their new subservience. The surrendering French are not spared any criticism, however: as Barsam suggests, the film presents France as "disillusioned and cynical [...] weary of her own ideals," almost ripe for the plucking by a force as focused and ruthless as Hitler's (1975: 152). It is in this instance that one could agree with McLane's suggestion that the series was "admired on aesthetic and technical grounds but not for its ability to indoctrinate", because *Divide and Conquer* presents a devastating vision of catastrophic defeat by a terrifying foe, but offers little in the way of inspiration (aside from a rather limp suggestion that Charles de Gaulle's army-in-exile would rescue the French people in conjunction with Britain and the United States) (2012: 142).

***The Battle of Britain (1943) / The Battle of Russia (1943) / The Battle of China (1943)***

The three films chronicling the efforts of the United States' allies up to, and immediately following, American entry into the war are politically interesting for a variety of reasons, not least because the latter two are poetic and at times beautiful celebrations of two nations that would quickly become enemies of the United States in the years following World War II. All three of these films are designed to inspire by demonstrating that, unlike the first three in the series, the Axis powers were beatable. Although McBride notes that the earlier films, such as *Prelude to War*, may have in fact *increased* the impression of the enemy's strength by the soldiers watching, the battles of Britain, Russia and China all conclude with inspiring words from, and images of, the victorious Allies (1992: 482).

*The Battle of Britain* is perhaps the simplest of the three films. It begins with the infamous footage of Hitler surveying the spoils of his French conquest, looking up at the Eiffel Tower, the images of the Nazi armies robotically marching through the Parisian streets underscored by an ominous orchestral score as attentions turn to Britain. The image of Britain the film offers is a familiar one: the plucky, stubborn little island in the north Atlantic that refused to yield to Hitler and his plans for world domination. In service of this image, the film consistently juxtaposes the ruthless power of the German forces with the determined British people, memorably figured as little Jonah about to be swallowed by the Nazi whale. The use of familiar British songs like 'Land of Hope and Glory' and 'British Grenadier' provide defiant counterpoint to the images of German bombardment, and the animations that show the malevolent Nazi forces scorch their way across Europe.

These are the most politically significant elements of *The Battle of Britain*: the fearsome Nazi bombardment, witnessed the previous two parts of *Why We Fight*, is repeated here, but interspersed are British propaganda images to reinforce the pluck and determination in the face of adversity. As Dyer MacCann suggests of the film, “The outnumbered people and the little air force are the steady heroes of this remarkable moving picture. No thoughtful American could watch this dramatic and terrible story without a sense of wonder and gratitude that this thing could have been done on this little island in 1940” (1973: 159). In this regard, the film offers us romanticised images of the people of Britain: women scrubbing floors, serving meals, caring for children; men in pubs, tending churchyards. This ‘home guard’ – the clerk, the butcher, the farmer, the member of parliament – constituted the nation that would resist German conquest at all costs. In the absence of the right equipment, the British would employ ‘the weapon of spirit’. Capra’s Britain is the stuff of Ealing comedies: we are shown footage of resolute citizens playing harmonica in underground bomb shelters, making light of the persistent threat of death at the hands of German bombs, Londoners waking up each morning after a night of bombardment to continue life as normal, drinking cups of tea and comparing notes on the previous evening’s bombing, a husband and wife returning to their damaged home, the woman dismissing her husband’s suggestion she leave for safer terrain. All of these images are designed to reinforce the narrator’s suggestion that ‘Hitler could kill them, but damned if he could lick them’, a claim further reinforced by the images of Brits celebrating Christmas in the middle of the Battle of Britain. The carol-singing, when one considers the anti-religious attitudes of Nazism addressed in *Prelude to War*, becomes itself a political statement.

Barsam suggests “*The Battle of Russia* is a tough, fast, informative film,” although it is the longest of the series (1975: 153). It is an emotional celebration of the nation that tore the

heart out of the German war machine, and is rather more careful in its construction than Barsam's characterisation implies. While familiarity with Britain and the British (or, at least, *stereotypes* of the nation and its people) probably negated the necessity of such a strategy in the series' previous instalment, *The Battle of Russia* emphasises the size ('all of North America and a million square miles to boot'), wealth (gold, silver, copper, tin, manganese and nickel), and diversity (Ukrainians, Armenians, Georgians and Laplanders, to name but a few) of the Soviet Union. The film makes use of other (fictional) films, particularly Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and Vladimir Petrov's *Peter the First* (1937) to celebrate Russian heroes, and emphasise the historical tendency for the country to be invaded though never conquered.

What the film does not do, and scholars of Capra and of documentary have been quick to point this out in postwar studies of the film, is excoriate (or even mention) Soviet communism or authoritarianism. The absence of this criticism caused headaches for Capra and his production team in the anti-communist 1950s: as McBride notes, "Capra felt vulnerable for having made *The Battle of Russia*, which not only had nothing critical to say about the Soviet political system but even went so far as to call the Soviets a 'free and united people'" (1992: 462). The cloud of suspicion that hung over the film after the war ended speaks far more of the atmosphere of paranoia in the United States rather than anything actually in (or not in) the film itself: it is indeed an insistent positive vision of Russian bravery in the face of what appeared inevitable defeat, and a highly selective image of its government and economy, but this is entirely unsurprising. *Why We Fight* intends to emphasise the similarities and continuities between the Allies, and *The Battle of Russia* is no different. As Capra himself stated (having attempted to distance himself from the production of the film in the immediate aftermath of the war, as discussed by McBride (1992: 486-7),



“you understand these were our allies. We were fighting a common enemy at the time, not each other. Unless you get into that, you won’t understand the simplifications” (quoted in Bailey 2004: 126).

The ‘simplifications’, as Capra describes them, are in keeping with those of the previous instalment, *The Battle of Britain*. The setpieces of the film are no doubt the siege of Leningrad and the battle of Stalingrad. It is in these sequences that the series’ sophisticated use of montage editing comes to the fore to emphasise the Russian grit and determination to resist the Nazi bombardment: German shelling is juxtaposed with Russian manufacturing, welding, smelting, producing their own weapons to counter the unrelenting volley of ammunition headed their way. The editing is rapid, so each German shell is swiftly followed by a shot of Russian military manufacturing. Significantly, the German shelling is impersonal, delivered by enormous guns thrust into the sky, while the film shows us Russian faces working at their machines, creating a sense of identification with the cause. The victory at Stalingrad is rendered all the more powerful by the images of the defeated Germans, who appear addled, exhausted, shuffling to oblivion, one soldier trudging into an icy abyss.

*The Battle of China*, criticised by Barsam as the “weakest” of the series, does suffer from a trite, patronising tone, but given the fact that it was designed to be seen by American troops who had never been to China, nor met many of its people, this is perhaps unsurprising (1975: 152). At the time, there was some criticism of the film from General Frederick Osborn, to whom Capra was answerable, because the film contained so much material taken from fiction film that did not depict historical events (McBride 1992: 482). Similarly, the sentimental tone of the film was rebuked by the War Department, to which Capra responded, “I know there are people [...] who claim we have put too much ‘emotion’ in these films. [...] But my

experiences with audiences has [*sic*] long ago taught me that if you want facts to stick, you must present them in an interesting manner (quoted in *ibid.*) Like *The Battle of Russia*, it emphasises the history of the nation, its civilisation and its achievements: “an ancient culture [...] bigger than Europe and the United States [...] never waged a war of conquest.” Again, like the Russians and the British, the Chinese are portrayed as a courageous and defiant people, who employ their ingenuity to resist their invaders and prevent their ultimate defeat. Indeed, the film suggests that it was the Japanese invasion that ‘created’ the Chinese nation, as it forced the people to band together in a show of collective solidarity.

This is radically juxtaposed by the film’s representation of Japan, whose plan for world conquest is laid bare. The film is almost as concerned with demonising the Japanese as it is with celebrating China. Indeed, the film seeks to establish China and Japan as diametrically opposed – where China uses Western manufacturing technology to modernise its nation and improve the lives of its people, Japan employs this for naked military aggression. In its treatment of the Japanese, *The Battle of China* represents the closest the series comes to open racism, for while its attitude towards the Germans often played on national stereotypes of ruthless efficiency and organisation, the Japanese are characterised as ‘blood-crazed Japs’, dehumanised as ‘the little yellow men.’ Although the films’ previous instalments featured shocking footage of the German bombing of Rotterdam following the Dutch surrender and deeply upsetting images of dead children during the attacks on Stalingrad, the bombardment of Shanghai paints the Japanese as a savage, cruel people. Capra may have balked at the accusation of infusing his propaganda films with ‘too much emotion’ but *The Battle of China* does occasionally tip the scales of information and inspiration in favour of the latter, skating close to the kinds of ‘hate’ films produced in World War I that the American government were determined to avoid.

## **Conclusion: *War Comes to America* (1945)**

The seventh and final part of *Why We Fight*, released just two months prior to Japan's unconditional surrender, is also the least considered of the series (perhaps because of its proximity to the war's end). *War Comes to America* provides a satisfying conclusion, drawing together the various strands of the conflict and presenting them entirely through the eyes of Americans, both soldiers and civilians. It charts the changing attitudes Americans took to their participation in the war, shifting from isolationism to internationalism. Like Capra's fiction films, it is a celebration of Americanism, from the first few seconds where Old Glory, billowing proudly in the wind, is underscored by children reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. It makes consistent use of American imagery, particularly the Statue of Liberty, as symbolic of the 'idea' on which the nation is founded: democracy and freedom. Like the films about Britain, Russia and China, the film emphasises the diversity of America's fighting forces ('rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief; doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief') and, as a final blow to isolationism, recalls the birth of the nation on the battlefields of the War of Independence.

In drawing the series to a conclusion in this fashion, the film demonstrates the extent to which *Why We Fight* fulfilled the demand for a coherent and holistic chronicle of the history and context of the war the American government were asking its people to fight, and offers compelling and clear reasons for it. Doherty's suggestion that the films speak "eloquently and calmly" for the hopes of a better world in the future is an instructive one, although it must be remembered that, as indicated by the conclusion of *War Comes to America*, that this future is linked, inextricably, with the success and vitality of American ideology. As the film series' first instalment had celebrated the Declaration of Independence as a document that could

speak for *all* mankind's hopes for a better world, so the series' concluding moments, the American flag billowing in the wind and the Statue of Liberty standing proud and tall, offer visual figuration of that which the seven films had sought to reinforce throughout: this is not only a fight against tyranny and persecution, but a fight *for* liberty, tolerance, and the 'American way'.

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